THEODORE ROETHKE, PANTHEIST

An abstract of a thesis by
Gloria Merritt-Piersall
December 1974
Drake University
Advisor: Dr. Edward Mayo

To this writer, there appears to be a definite pattern of implied pantheism in Roethke's early poems, a pattern more obviously developed in the middle poems, and even more fully expressed or implied in the later poems, including those published after his death.

And so, in an attempt to prove that Roethke's poetry is pantheistic, this thesis first contrasts his views on nature with those of two other American poets, Robert Frost and T.S. Eliot. Both Frost--enjoying nature but distrustful of it, and Eliot--convinced of the essential hostility of nature toward man and, above all, feeling modern man to be alienated from the natural world--provide a backdrop against which Roethke's rapturous and painful journey into nature and his growing tendency toward pantheism are more clearly viewed.

The methodology of this thesis consists of 1) furnishing germane opinions of such Roethke critics as make even passing reference to his pantheistic leanings but especially of 2) analyzing in depth several representative poems from each of three stages of his poetic development: the 1941-1958 collection, Words for the Wind, The Far Field poems, published in 1964, and finally, portions of Straw for the Fire, published in 1972, but representing some twenty years of poetic development. The analysis of these poems consists of an evaluation of various aspects of them such as imagery, sound effects, rhythmic pattern, rhyme, if any--to determine how the foregoing contribute to the quality of Roethke's pantheism. Naturally, the content of each poem is the primary concern because the writer believes that a consideration of that content shows a definite pattern of pantheism which developed in Roethke's poetry through the years.

The conclusion of the thesis includes a survey of recent critical views of the poetry that acknowledge even briefly the pantheism of Roethke, also a summary of the writer's reasons for believing that it is the poems themselves that offer the strongest evidence of that pantheism. These reasons for belief in his pantheism include the discernible pattern of his turning away from depression toward a belief in the One, the Light beyond light; his continual catalogues of the 'lovely diminutives;' his unique imagery, highly evocative and symbolic; the poet's strong belief in the compassionate source within nature; his reverence for all of nature--even the strange and the ugly; a deep yearning toward what he thinks that the 'littles' represent. And surely the most powerful argument of all for the pantheistic view of his poetry is based on the thoughts that he voices through the imagery, the statements or affirmations of the Roethke who believes in something beyond his finite self. 'I'm more than when I was born;/ I could say hello to things,/ I could talk to a snail;/ I see what sings!/ A lively understandable spirit/ Once entertained you./ It will come again./Be still./ Wait.'

THEODORE ROETHKE, PANTHEIST

A Thesis

Presented to

The School of Graduate Studies

Drake University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in English

---

by

Gloria Merritt-Piersall

December 1974

THEODORE ROETHKE, PANTHEIST

by

Gloria Merritt-Piersall

Approved by Committee:

E. L. Mayo
Chairman

J A Stroud

Dale Miller

Earle J Campfield
Dean of the School of Graduate Studies

For he could love the world but not himself;
And cried to be an instrument. And was.

Theodore Roethke, Straw for the Fire, p. 341

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION TO THESIS

To the serious student of poetry, a particular poet's view of nature is of primary importance, a true key to the man himself. For the attitude of that poet toward nature reveals, in effect, his attitude toward self and the world in which he lives. Not surprisingly, different poets have always had conflicting views about nature. Thus, in the pantheon of American poets, one can find examples of the two extremes of attitudes: a sense of alienation from, and hostility toward, nature, or a sense of ecstatic oneness with, and longing toward, a Being in which nature and man merge. A third attitude, or middle ground between the two extremes, is characteristic of the poet who enjoys and appreciates nature but is frankly distrustful of its many faces and moods. It is the belief of the writer of this thesis that Theodore Roethke is a superb example of one of those extremes, a pantheist-poet who believed of the universe as Alexander Pope did: "Whose body nature is and God the soul." And Frank Gaynor enlarges the definition: "Pantheism [is] the doctrine that reality comprises a single being of which all things are modes, moments, members, appearances, or projections."[1]

---

[1]Frank Gaynor, ed., The Dictionary of Mysticism (New York: Philosophical Library, 1953), p. 135.

But it was surprising to this writer to discover, after a thorough search of theses, dissertations, and critical essays, about Roethke, that no critic, thus far, has seriously attempted to analyze the poems themselves in depth in order to evaluate them in terms of their pantheism. And yet, to this writer, there appears to be a definite pattern of implied pantheism in the earlier poems, a pattern more obviously developed in the middle poems, and even more fully expressed or implied in the later poems, including those published after his death.

And so, in an attempt to prove that Roethke's poetry is pantheistic, this thesis will first contrast his views on nature with those of two other American poets, Robert Frost and T.S. Eliot. Both Frost--enjoying nature but distrustful of it, and Eliot--convinced of the essential hostility of nature toward man and, above all, feeling modern man to be alienated from the natural world--should provide a backdrop against which Roethke's rapturous and painful journey into nature and his growing tendency toward pantheism will show up in bold relief.

But, before turning to the primary sources, Roethke's poetry and prose, and endeavoring to trace the strong threads of pantheistic thought woven through them, it would be well to look at a few early poems written by Frost and Eliot, to determine more precisely Roethke's position in the spectrum of nature poets.

A poet's thinking usually fluctuates, resulting in his changing his point of view about nature, for example, in the course of his writing lifetime, and this is certainly true of Eliot and his poetry. In the early Eliot, there is the reflection of a state of mind and spirit which he observes around him in the contemporary world. As Kristian Smidt remarks of Eliot's early almost obsessive belief, "Not only are human beings isolated from their fellows, but nature also appears unfeeling and unsympathetic."[2]

From Eliot's early works which illustrate modern man's disillusionment with the Romantic view of nature, the writer has chosen certain lines from three of his poems to reveal the embittered attitude of his poetic protagonists.

---

[2]Kristian Smidt, Poetry and Belief in the Work of T.S. Eliot (New York: Humanities Press, 1961), p. 141.

First, these two lines from "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"[3] say much:

> I should have been a pair of ragged claws
> Scuttling across the floors of silent seas.

Poor old Prufrock feels that it is too painful to be human, to suffer, to be forever on the horns of a dilemma. Better, far better, to be an insensitive member of one of the lower orders of the animal kingdom, a crustacean, and lack man's capacity to feel nature's cruelty or indifference. If he were himself a less complex part of the world of nature, he would not be aware of nature's hostility, would be unaware of its cruelty, unlike his painfully sensitive human counterpart.

For Eliot's contemporaries there were none of Roethke's "lovely littles" in the universe. The speaker in "Gerontion"[4] is old and beaten to his knees, tortured by living in the world, chiefly aware of the torments nature inflicts upon man:

> Here I am, an old man in a dry month.
> Being read to by a boy, waiting for rain.
> I was neither at the hot gates
> Nor fought in the warm rain
> Nor knee deep in the salt marsh, heaving a cutlass,
> Bitten by flies, fought.

---

[3] T.S. Eliot, Collected Poems (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1958), p. 14.

[4] Ibid., p. 43.

Life is essentially composed of deserts, not oases, says Eliot. Man is made to endure drouth when he most needs rain, physically and emotionally. If he chooses to fight actively the battle of life, up to his knees in salt water, how that salt smarts in literal or figurative wounds! And flies are not mere pests to be flicked away but creatures sent to torture man, yet another reminder of the punishments, great and small, that he must endure.

But it is in The Waste Land, his master statement of the essential horror and pain of living, and, above all, the strength-sapping aridity of existence, that Eliot's view of modern man's bleak despair is unmistakable. These lines are from the portion called "The Burial of the Dead"[5]:

> April is the cruellest month, breeding
> Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
> Memory and desire, stirring
> Dull roots with spring rain.
> Winter kept us warm, covering
> Earth in forgetful snow, feeding
> A little life with dried tubers.

Eliot's hero is saying that it is better to be cold and unfeeling, frozen in the wintertime of the physical world and of the soul, than to have memory and desire fanned alive again in the lilac-laden spring rains of April.

But if the early Eliot stands Romanticism on its head,[6] the early Frost marks the beginnings of an attempt to turn poetry back on its feet once more in the direction of believing

---

[5] Ibid., p. 69.

[6] Dr. E.L. Mayo, Professor of English at Drake University, Des Moines, Iowa, in a conversation with the writer in July, 1973.

that nature is not wholly cold of heart. As he puts it in "The Lesson for Today," "I had a lover's quarrel with the world." Marion Montgomery further analyzes his poetic approach:

> His [Frost's] attitude toward nature is one of armed and amicable truce and mutual respect interspersed with crossings of the boundaries separating the two principles, individual man and forces of the world.[7]

Turning to the first of three Frostian views of nature, one notes his lighter tone, his tendency to move away from Eliot's almost unalleviated despair.

Tree at My Window[8]

> Tree at my window, window tree,
> My sash is lowered when night comes on;
> But let there never be curtain drawn
> Between you and me.
>
> Vague dream-head lifted out of the ground,
> And thing next most diffuse to cloud,
> Not all your light tongues talking aloud
> Could be profound.
>
> But tree, I have seen you taken and tossed,
> And if you have seen me when I slept,
> You have seen me when I was taken and swept
> And all but lost.
>
> That day she put our heads together,
> Fate had her imagination about her,
> Your head so much concerned with outer,
> Mine with inner, weather.

---

[7]Marion Montgomery, "Robert Frost and His Use of Barriers: Man vs. Nature Toward God," Robert Frost, ed. James M. Cox (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1962), p. 138.

[8]Robert Frost, Collected Poems (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1930), p. 318.

Robert Frost, far from feeling alienated from nature, wants no curtain, or barrier, between himself and the tree, or nature. Drawing an analogy, he sees that both he and the tree are tossed about by life, yet there is no bitter tone in this poem to suggest that Frost feels nature is inimical. In the last stanza, Frost remarks that nature (or fate) "put our heads together." Not wishing to draw into himself and away from nature, he reveals, instead, a warmth of concern for natural elements and a wish to study them more closely.

"Putting in the Seed"[9] gives an even clearer glimpse of Frost's near love affair, his "lover's quarrel with the world ":

> You come to fetch me from my work tonight
> When supper's on the table, and we'll see
> If I can leave off burying the white
> Soft petals fallen from the apple tree
> (Soft petals, yes, but not so barren, quite,
> Mingled with these, smooth bean and wrinkled pea;)
> And go along with you ere you lose sight
> Of what you came for and become like me,
> Slave to a springtime passion for the earth.
> How Love burns through the Putting in the Seed
> On through the watching for that early birth
> When, just as the soil tarnishes with weed,
>
> The sturdy seedling with arched body comes
> Shouldering its way and shedding the earth crumbs.

And if the quarrel with the world becomes an almost-reconciliation between man, the lover, and nature, the beloved, in this just-quoted poem about planting, another,

---

[9] Ibid., p. 155.

"A Winter Eden,"[10] shows Frost nearly convinced that warm, lovely, loving earth comes close to paradise.

A winter garden in an alder swamp,
Where conies now come out to sun and romp,
As near a paradise as it can be
And not melt snow or start a dormant tree.

It lifts existence on a plane of snow
One level higher than the earth below,
One level nearer heaven overhead,
And last year's berries shining scarlet red.

It lifts a gaunt luxuriating beast
Where he can stretch and hold his highest feast
On some wild apple tree's young tender bark
What well may prove the year's high girdle mark.

So near to paradise all pairing ends:
Here loveless birds now flock as winter friends.
Content with bud-inspecting. They presume
To say which buds are leaf and which are bloom.

A feather-hammer gives a double knock.
This Eden day is done at two o'clock.
An hour of winter day might seem too short
To make it worth life's while to wake and sport.

Frost seems to be saying that it might be worth his own "thawing out" like this unusual winter day that stops just short of melting the snow. Might be, but maybe the wiser course is to enjoy life's brief spring-in-winter and not to expect total warmth from a nature now warm, now cold. Love nature, yes, but be careful. Winter, and life, are often deceiving. Keep your guard up. You could be frozen by a deceptively affectionate nature.

It remains for a love-and-risk-all poet like Roethke to embrace nature with an almost total lack of reserve,

---

[10] Ibid., p. 322.

to remain open to being hurt by it rather than miss a moment of its sometime warmth. Through all of his senses, but especially sight, he appreciates nature, delighting in the feast of the eye. As Nathan Scott comments,

> . . . it was quite early in his life that he decided that his heart should keep 'open house,' with 'doors widely swung' before the strangely wondrous 'epic of the eyes' presented by the 'small things of the world.'[11]

And Karl Malkoff underscores Roethke's loving ocular view of the outer and inner worlds:

> . . . we know that for Roethke the eye is the key to truth, the door to vision. The eye is his symbol of spiritual perception. It is, in fact, by means of the senses that one perceives reality.[12]

However, before turning to other critical views and to the Roethke poems themselves and attempting to explain the pantheistic views therein, the writer of this thesis needs to explain the procedure and define two terms. The methodology of this thesis shall consist of 1) furnishing germane opinions of such Roethke critics as make even passing reference to his pantheistic leanings but especially of 2) analyzing in depth a few

---

[11]Nathan Scott, The Wild Prayer of Longing (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971), p. 89.

[12]Karl Malkoff, Theodore Roethke (New York: Columbia University Press, 1966), p. 39.

representative poems from each of three different stages of Roethke's poetic development: the 1941-1958 collection, Words for the Wind, The Far Field poems, published in 1964 after his death in August of 1963, and finally, portions of Straw for the Fire, published as recently as 1972, but representing some twenty years of poetic development. The analysis of these poems shall consist of an evaluation of various aspects such as the imagery, the effects created by such devices as alliteration, for example, and the rhythmic pattern, even the rhyme, if any, and how the foregoing all contribute to the quality of pantheism Roethke's writing demonstrates. The content of each poem chosen shall be of primary concern because, of course, the writer will endeavor to show Roethke's pattern of pantheism or implied pantheism. The following term with this specific definition shall apply throughout this thesis:

> Pantheism--The doctrine that reality comprises a single being of which all things are modes, moments, members, appearances, or projections.

CHAPTER II

THE POETRY OF WORDS FOR THE WIND

The early poems representing Roethke's creative production between 1941 and 1957 are drawn together in Words for the Wind, published in 1958. Placed in a time sequence, these poems offer an opportunity to observe at close range the development of the man and the poet in the direction of what is not so much an overt, explicit pantheism as an implicit pantheism. Of this struggle toward maturity, toward finding and coming to believe in something beyond himself, Roethke says to a friend,

> You are right in thinking of The Lost Son as an experience complete in itself. But it is only the first of four experiences, each in a sense stages in a kind of struggle out of the slime; part of a slow spiritual progress, if you will; part of an effort to be born.[13]

Though The Lost Son is only one group of poems comprising a small book within the larger one, Words for the Wind,

---

[13]Ralph J. Mills, ed., Selected Letters of Theodore Roethke (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1968), p. 140.

all the poems that make up the collection are indicative of the poet's 'struggle out of the slime... a slow spiritual progress,' as he puts it. Choosing a fragment of one poem and four complete poems in addition, then analyzing them in part or in toto in regard to imagery and content will, this thesis-writer believes, reveal the pantheistic pattern which even these first poems possess.

In the last five lines of what is, otherwise, a frankly erotic poem about physical love, one reads

> I'm more than when I was born;
> I could say hello to things;
> I could talk to a snail;
> I see what sings!
> What sings![14]

Thus the conclusion of a celebration of his enjoyment of love-making, or his delight in his physicality, becomes a celebration of steps toward acceptance of another reality for Roethke, his spirituality. He expresses this spirituality,

---

[14]Roethke, from "O Lull Me, Lull Me" in Words for the Wind (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1958), p. 78.

which will become more obviously stated as he writes and develops, in simple, yet powerful words: "I'm more than when I was born." And his ability to come back, even from frequent nervous breakdowns, with optimism in the face of fear comes through in "I could say hello to things." For Roethke to say hello to things in this sense is to acknowledge positively something beyond himself, inherent in nature-- and to lean toward pantheism. For this poet there is also a kind of wordless speech to be heard from the speechless things of the world if one listens sensitively, imaginatively. "I could talk to a snail," he adds. Why does he choose a snail of all things? Unlike Wordsworth, pantheist-celebrant of the majestic in nature-- mountains, rivers, lakes, forests, clouds, and acres of wild flowers--Roethke sings of, and hears the singing of, the small things of the world and rejoices in them as miniature miracles worthy of the poet's attention. If the macrocosm of the early pantheist poets deserved writing about, then so do the elements of the microcosm. Even the fact that the five quoted lines shrink and grow shorter, in turn, from seven words to six to four to two--is indicative, this writer believes. It is as though Roethke is reminding the reader that longer lines or larger

objects in nature are not the only ways to suggest or experience an intuitive knowledge of power behind it all.

But one can turn to entire poems by the early Roethke and discover clearer expressions of maturing pantheism. "It was beginning winter," for example, reveals this poet of the 'lovely littles' but goes beyond simply cataloguing what he sees.

It was beginning winter.[15]

It was beginning winter,
An in-between time,
The landscape still partly brown:
The bones of weeds kept swinging in the wind,
Above the blue snow.

It was beginning winter.
The light moved slowly over the frozen field,
Over the dry seed-crowns,
The beautiful surviving bones
Swinging in the wind.

Light traveled over the field;
Stayed.
The weeds stopped swinging.
The mind moved, not alone,
Through the clear air, in the silence.

Was it light?
Was it light within?
Was it light within light?
Stillness becoming alive,
Yet still?

A lively understandable spirit
Once entertained you.
It will come again.
Be still.
Wait.

---

[15]Roethke, Words for the Wind, pp. 84-85.

To this thesis-writer, the winter of Roethke's poem is not merely winter, though he does start off by describing the season in vivid images that make the reader see or hear or touch. For example, this is not mid-winter but "an in-between time" with "the landscape still partly brown" and the snow not the usual white, but blue--probably from the shadows on it. One can see this picture clearly in his own mind. Also, there is sound as well as sight imagery in this first stanza because the dead weeds make a dry, papery sound as they swing in the wind. The same first line, "It was beginning winter," begins the second stanza, creating a unifying effect that is quite satisfying. However, a new element now enters the winter scene: light, which develops into a special symbol for Roethke, a literal and symbolic element to be found again and again in the middle and late periods of his poetry. And, as in the first verse, he chooses words to suggest that this particular winter comes on gently and gradually, not harshly and suddenly, as in a blizzard. "The light moved slowly over the frozen field," he says. And one has to slow down his reading, actually, to say those words,--words suggesting to the eye and to the ear that this specific winter day comes on slowly, serenely,

with a luminosity possible only when light, real or figurative, reflects on that blue snow and the frozen grasses and weeds still standing above the snow, still swinging in the wind, and making the sounds that only dry leaves and seed-crowns make when the wind blows. By the third stanza, though, Roethke's light is no longer only the pale, watery light of winter made brighter by reflection off snow and ice, but a light moving in the mind of the poet, it seems to this writer: "The mind moved, not alone,/ Through the clear air, in the silence." For Roethke, then, this is no longer merely a winter scene to be described with rare word choices but a deeper experience, and one no longer simply sensed through the eyes and ears. It has reached the mind of Roethke: "The mind moved, not alone." And the fourth stanza finds the poet-observer asking deeper questions about light and the nature of light. For this writer, the questions of stanza four reveal the implicit pantheism of even the early poetry of Theodore Roethke. Back of the picture that nature presents, and <u>within</u> nature as well, is the symbolic Light that animates and illuminates it all. The fifth and final stanza reveals that the poet has now moved from mere contemplation of a winter scene and the recording of the images suggested by the scene. He looks, he notices the

light, the mind moves (his mind), and that mind asks about the nature of light, symbolically. Finally, the light is transmuted into "a lively understandable spirit" that "will come again." Roethke first sees nature, then into it, and, at last, beyond it into the spirit that is in nature when he contemplates it deeply. Here, then, is a poem with implicit pantheistic qualities. It is as though he works his way through an Eliot stage of despair at the indifference and hostility of the ice and snow of things toward a Frost stage of "Yes, the world is beautiful." He, Roethke, discovers a Spirit in himself and in nature, even in the cold, dead season of winter, that is a part of him--and he is a part of It.

Lending strength to the thesis that Roethke's poetry is essentially, implicitly pantheistic is Ralph Mills,[16] who quotes Roethke himself about the importance of writing worthwhile poetry, not mere superficial meanderings:

> It is one of the ways man at least approaches the divine--in this comprehensive human act, the really good poem. For there is a God, and He's here, immediate, accessible. I don't hold with those thinkers that believe in this time that
>
> He is farther away--that in the Middle Ages, for instance, He was closer. He is equally accessible now, not only in works of art or in the glories of a particular religious service or in the light, the aftermath that follows the dark night of the soul, but in the lowest forms of life, He moves and has His being. Nobody has killed off the snails.

---

[16]Ralph J. Mills, ed., On the Poet and His Craft (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1965), p. 27.

A third pantheistic poem of the early period of Roethke's work is "A Field of Light." A longer poem than "It was beginning winter," it reveals even more of the awe that Roethke feels in the presence of the uncommon commonplace things of the world. The final stanza in which he speaks of the "lovely diminutives" is a song in praise of a Being within the universe that is also a part of his inner being.

But to appreciate "A Field of Light" and to study its strains of pantheism, one needs to begin at the beginning and find the images with which Roethke creates moods, and to note especially the discoveries that he makes about nature. In the first three lines of the first stanza, he manages to create a quietly depressed mood that the reader can fail to appreciate unless the vowel sounds are studied, then sounded, silently or aloud.

A FIELD OF LIGHT[17]

1
Came to lakes; came to dead water,
Ponds with moss and leaves floating,
Planks sunk in the sand.

A log turned at the touch of a foot;
A long weed floated upward;
An eye tilted.

Small winds made
A chilly noise;
The softest cove
Cried for sound.

Reached for a grape
And the leaves changed;
A stone's shape
Became a clam.

A fine rain fell
On fat leaves;
I was there alone
In a watery drowse.

2
Angel within me, I asked,
Did I ever curse the sun?
Speak and abide.

---

[17]Roethke, Words for the Wind, pp. 90-92.

Under, under the sheaves,
Under the blackened leaves,
Behind the green viscid trellis,
In the deep grass at the edge of a field,
Along the low ground dry only in August,—

Was it dust I was kissing?
A sigh came far.
Alone, I kissed the skin of a stone;
Marrow-soft, danced in the sand.

3
The dirt left my hand, visitor.
I could feel the mare's nose.
A path went walking.
The sun glittered on a small rapids.
Some morning thing came, beating its wings.
The great elm filled with birds.

Listen, love,
The fat lark sang in the field;
I touched the ground, the ground warmed by the killdeer,
The salt laughed and the stones;
The ferns had their ways, and the pulsing lizards,
And the new plants, still awkward in their soil,
The lovely diminutives.

I could watch! I could watch!
I saw the separateness of all things!
My heart lifted up with the great grasses;
The weeds believed me, and the nesting birds.
There were clouds making a rout of shapes crossing a windbreak of cedars,

And a bee shaking drops from a rainsoaked honeysuckle.
The worms were delighted as wrens.
And I walked, I walked through the light air,
I moved with the morning.

(This depressed mood, naturally, makes the joyful mood of the last stanza of the poem far more joy-filled than it would otherwise be, had there been no blackness at the opening.) One has only to begin listing the words and thinking of the effect of the sounds in those words at the opening: came/lakes; ponds/moss; planks/sunk. The sounds are sad, muted--and 'dead water' together with 'planks sunk in the sand' suggest the death of hope, a dark mood. Then the words in the second group of three lines take on a livelier note: 'a log turned,' 'a long weed floated upward/ An eye tilted' (...a fish or other small creature in that water anyhow!) Then kinesthesia livens the first four-line grouping in stanza one: 'small winds make/A chilly noise.' Can a sound or noise be not only a sound but a sensation or feeling? Certainly to the imaginative! The last two lines of the four-liner suggest the sound of grief, not only in the word themselves but in the two hard c words and the two soft s words: 'The softest cove/Cried for sound.' In the next group of four lines, the long a sounds of the opening lines are heard again: grape, changed, became. In the lines 'A stone's shape/ Became a clam' is, perhaps, almost a biblical reference:

'If a son ask his father for bread, will he give him a stone?' And Roethke does ask, in his life and in his writings, for figurative bread--answers to some of the why's of human existence. He concludes this first stanza with rain falling, and he is there 'alone/ In a watery drowse.' And even the sound that rain makes on leaves is created in 'A fine rain fell/ On fat leaves.' The f words, and the fact that one has to read these seven words aloud slowly, create a definite spattering sound of individual drops hitting the leaves. In the second verse, he asks, 'Angel within me.../ Did I ever curse the sun?/ Speak and abide.' The reader who goes beyond the words themselves knows that Roethke is not only calling upon his creative muse but upon that spirit which dwells within all forms of life. The lines which come next are longer and contain more syllables, thus resulting in a deliberately slower pace:

> Under, under the sheaves,
> Under the blackened leaves,
> Behind the green viscid trellis,
> In the deep grass at the edge of a field,
> Along the low ground dry only in August,--
> Was it dust I was kissing?

And dust is not the usual subject matter for poetry, though one finds echoes of 'all flesh is dust' and, indeed, no elements of life are lost even in decay. Roethke then goes into a one-man drama of delight as he says, 'Alone, I kissed the skin of a stone;/ Marrow-soft, danced in the sand.' Both the vowel and consonant sounds have become brighter and the brisk rhythm of 'danced in the sand' fits just that action. He rejoices in nature, responds to it, believes that there is more to the universe, and to man himself, than the external. With the opening of the third stanza, 'the sun glittered,' there is a warmth, an optimism, and, at last, a rejoicing of all the little things of nature, a celebration in which Roethke joins at last with a fervor that is unmistakable:

> Listen, love,
> The fat lark sang in the field;
> I touched the ground, the ground warmed by the killdeer,
> The salt laughed and the stones;
> The ferns had their ways, and the pulsing lizards,
> And the new plants, still awkward in their soil,
> The lovely diminutives.

But the last nine almost psalm-like lines of "A Field of Light" sing with a pantheistic joy that only someone whose mourning has truly turned into gladness could begin to understand. Nature is not dead but <u>alive</u> because,

behind it and within it, the vital force still lives and moves:

> I could watch! I could watch!
> I saw the separateness of all things!
> My heart lifted up with the great grasses:
> The weeds believed me, and the nesting birds.
> There were clouds making a rout of shapes crossing
> a windbreak of cedars,
> And a bee shaking drops from a rain soaked honey-
> suckle.
> The worms were delighted as wrens.
> And I walked, I walked through the light air;
> I moved with the morning.

Though not all critics see pantheism in Roethke's poetry, or, if they see any of it, do not care to discuss it as being important and central to Roethke's poetic philosophy, there are several writers who do recognize his sense of the mystery of life and his ability to find words for expressing that mystery.

Granville Hicks[18] remarks of Roethke's sense of the inexplicable,

> Speaking of the kind of poetry he [Roethke] has written, he says that the poet 'must scorn being mysterious' or loosely oracular, but be willing to face up to genuine mystery.

---

[18] Granville Hicks, "Meeting the Genuine Mystery," Saturday Review, XLVIII (July 31, 1965), 15.

And Robert Boyers,[19] citing Roethke's gift for evoking the sights and sounds of nature, says, "The greenhouse world of his childhood provided Roethke with the raw materials to break into a poetic voice and universe of his own."

To study a fourth poem of Roethke's early period is to discover again the diverse facets of his pantheistic view: the love-filled catalogue of the tiny creatures of nature, the words chosen with care, not only for the images but also for the mood they create in the reader, so that he is open to the meaning that Roethke expresses in his poems. And rarely does Roethke write a poem that does not include at least one question so important that the poet attempts an answer to 'throw light on things' for the reader, but, in particular, for himself. This next poem is further proof of his pantheistic search.

---

[19]Robert Boyers, "The Roethke Puzzle," New Republic, CLX (January 18, 1969), 32.

THE SMALL[20]

The small birds swirl around;
The high cicadas chirr;
A towhee pecks the ground;
I look at the first star;
My heart held to its joy
This whole September day.

The moon goes to the full;
The moon goes slowly down;
The wood becomes a wall.
Far things draw closer in.
A wind moves through the grass.
Then all is as it was.

What rustles in the fern?
I feel my flesh divide.
Things lost in sleep return
As if out of my side,
On feet that make no sound
Over the sodden ground.

The small shapes drowse: I live
To woo the fearful small;
What moves in grass I love--
The dead will not lie still,
And things throw light on things,
And all the stones have wings.

---

[20]Roethke, Words for the Wind, p. 178.

First, there are the 'lovely littles': birds, cicadas, a star, grass, ferns, stones --'small shapes.' Then there is a definite rhyming pattern to end words--partly true rhyme, partly slant rhyme--which creates a serene mood, a mood of waiting to discover and learn. The ababcc rhyme pattern of each of the four stanzas of "The Small" suggests the self-discipline and quiet expectancy of the poet, who is trying to 'be still and know.' The reader sees and hears in sharp images the things of nature: birds swirl, cicadas chirr, the moon comes up and 'goes slowly down,' 'far things draw closer in.' To this thesis-writer, the far things that now draw closer are by no means merely the things that he has been watching: the essence or spirit, the meaning, if you will, of these natural objects now comes near to the poet's mind and spirit. Paradoxically, as the day of joy closes, and the light leaves, the darkness brings spiritual light, a clarity of vision that the poet did not have in simply looking at nature in sunlight. He becomes himself the Adam of a creation or significance that 'comes out of the rib' of his experience. And meanings come on soundless feet after he asks the Question:

What rustles in the fern?
I feel my flesh divide.
Things lost in sleep return
As if out of my side,
On feet that make no sound
Over the sodden ground.

And the last stanza finds Roethke saying simply what his greatest love affair, his primary objective, is:

The small shapes drowse: I live
To woo the fearful small;
What moves in grass I love--
The dead will not lie still,
And things throw light on things,
And all the stones have wings.

There is again light, or meaning thrown by things upon things, if one waits, listens, looks beyond the surface of nature and begins to sense the indwelling spirit. This is surely the implicit pantheism of Roethke appearing once more.

As a final selection from the early poems in Words from the Wind, the writer has chosen another Roethke poem about nature.

A Walk in Late Summer[21]

A gull rides on the ripples of a dream,
White upon white, slow-settling on a stone;
Across my lawn the soft-backed creatures come;
In the weak light they wander, each alone.
Bring me the meek, for I would know their ways;
I am a connoisseur of midnight eyes.
The small! The small! I hear them singing clear
On the long banks, in the soft summer air.

What is there for the soul to understand?
The slack face of the dismal pure inane?
The wind dies down; my will dies with the wind,
God's in that stone, or I am not a man!
Body and soul transcend appearances
Before the caving-in of all that is;
I'm dying piecemeal, fervent in decay;
My moments linger--that's eternity.

A late rose ravages the casual eye,
A blaze of being on a central stem.
It lies upon us to undo the lie
Of living merely in the realm of time.
Existence moves toward a certain end--
A thing all earthly lovers understand.
That dove's elaborate way of coming near
Reminds me that I am dying with the year.

A tree arises on a central plain--
It is no trick of change or chance of light.
A tree all out of shape from wind and rain,
A tree thinned by the wind obscures my sight.
The long day dies; I walk the woods alone;
Beyond the ridge two wood thrush sing as one.
Being delights in being, and in time.
The evening wraps me, steady as a flame.

---

[21]Roethke, Words for the Wind, pp. 179-80.

This image-filled poem about the simple act of taking a walk in summer is no mere picture of nature. The powerful thoughts that Roethke expresses reveal this as another vehicle for pantheistic expression. As in the previous poem, "The Small," there is a pattern of both true rhyme and slant rhyme, a pattern that, joined with the conversational flow of pentameter rhythm to the lines, lends a mood of serenity and a sensation that Roethke's thoughts about nature have gone beyond nature's beauty to recognize the source of that beauty. And the old poetic device of alliteration shines with a new lustre in this poem. There is scarcely a line without at least one alliterative effect: rides/ripples; slow/settling/stone; creatures/come; weak/wander; me/meek; would/ways; small/singing; soft/summer--all these give a melodic quality to the first stanza. Roethke continues the melody of alliterative sound throughout the three remaining stanzas. These repeated sounds, plus the loveliness of the unique Roethke images, prepare the reader for the moments when mind and spirit transcend the physical. One does not so much walk as glide along in this poem. "A gull rides on the ripples of a dream" as the walk begins. And "across my lawn the soft-backed creatures come."

And "The small! The small! I hear them singing clear" does not mean that only birds are gathering on the grass near dusk. For Roethke, all things sing or resound with their own kind of music if one is imaginative enough to listen for it. Almost, there is the suggestion of 'music of the spheres' as this almost silent, dream-like gathering of diminutives is enacted. There is a kind of singing in their graceful, nearly silent coming. Then, opening the second stanza, he asks the Question, "What is there for the soul to understand?" Roethke is never solely concerned with capturing the beauty of nature, though he does care about expressing it, of course. Rather, it is the 'beyond nature' quality that he presses toward and endeavors to understand and find the words to express. At the heart of the second stanza lies a Roethke-tested philosophical view, pantheistic, of course: "God's in that stone, or I am not a man!/ Body and soul transcend appearances..." And the third stanza shines with the image of a real rose that is also a symbol, not merely a flower: "A late rose ravages the casual eye,/ A blaze of being on a central stem." The rose burns or blazes with Life force that will last beyond its own limited life span, reflecting a deeper truth about itself. The pantheist in Roethke follows up the rose image with "It lies upon us to undo the lie/

Of living merely in the realm of time." And, like classical music that ends on a resolving chord, the fourth stanza of this song-like poem of faith in that which is seen and that which is Unseen finds Roethke in a quietly joyful mood. He sees, as if for the first time, a tree that seems suddenly to rise in front of him, a tree that is "all out of shape from wind and rain,/A tree thinned by the wind obscures my sight." In a sense, the tree seems to get in the way of Roethke's seeing literally, physically--yet clears his sight in terms of seeing beyond, even into, Nature. In the concluding lines, "two wood thrush sing as one./ Being delights in being, and in time." If this writer understands the poem and its closing, the perfect unison of bird song symbolizes the physical and spiritual unity that Roethke feels at that moment of revelation.

And Babette Deutsch[22] sums it up in regard to Roethke's implicit pantheism, to be found in these poems and in many others:

> Shifting cadences and homely images taken from childhood memories of the floriculturalist's world...produce unusual and powerful effects. These poems are an account of the journey through the dark wood into the light that clothes the visible in the garments of eternity.

---

[22] Babette Deutsch, Poetry in Our Time (New York: Columbia University Press, 1956), p. 183.

CHAPTER III

THE POETRY OF THE FAR FIELD

To read the poems of Roethke's The Far Field, written between 1958 and 1963, is to discover that the pattern of pantheism prominent in the early poems continues to weave itself into these later poems as well.

An excellent starting point for consideration of these poems is the last stanza of the title poem.

The Far Field[23]

4

The lost self changes,
Turning toward the sea,
A sea-shape turning around,-
An old man with his feet before the fire,
In robes of green, in garments of adieu.

A man faced with his own immensity
Wakes all the waves, all their loose wandering fire.
The murmur of the absolute, the why
Of being born fails on his naked ears.
His spirit moves like monumental wind
That gentles on a sunny blue plateau.
He is the end of things, the final man.

All finite things reveal infinitude:
The mountain with its singular bright shade
Like the blue shine on freshly frozen snow,
The after light upon ice burdened pines;
Odor of basswood on a mountain-slope,
A scent beloved of bees;
Silence of water above a sunken tree:
The pure serene of memory in one man,-
A ripple widening from a single stone
Winding around the waters of the world.

---

[23]Theodore Roethke, The Collected Poems (Garden City: Doubleday, 1966), p. 201.

Roethke, given to premonitions throughout his life, seems to have known that his life was nearly over. And, in this particular poem, he speaks of himself as 'An old man with his feet before the fire,/ In robes of green, in garments of adieu.' It is interesting to note that he is not wearing the usual black of death's finality but the green of hope, the green of renewal, of belief in immortality beyond man's mortality. Before turning to the content of the poem, however, it is important to observe the outstanding alliteration and the effects it creates. The s words, for example, give a soft, whispering, nostalgic effect: self/sea; sea-shape; singular/shade; shine/snow; silence/sunken; single/stone. This final stanza of a final poem,--final in a special sense, in that the poet is summing up what he feels about nature and about life--has some remarkable w alliteration also: wakes/waves/wandering; winding/waters/world. The result is a rippling sound coming from the combination of s and w alliteration that is beautifully suited, not only to actual sounds of water rippling, but to the figurative ripples that can be set off in the mind and spirit as well. J.G. Fuller[24] comments,

> They [the poems] express his preoccupation with the love of nature, and with the ripples of many waters.

---

[24]J.G. Fuller, "Trade Winds," Saturday Review, XLVIII (March 27, 1965), 10.

And then to look at the ideas in the fourth stanza of this poem is to discover again Roethke's pantheism. The dying man, 'A man faced with his own immensity,' discovers that 'The murmur of the absolute, the why of being born falls on his naked ears.' Surely this is Roethke seeing and hearing beyond the physical, mortal limitations of living and into the spiritual, immortal, unlimited nature of the universe. And the beautiful paradox expressed in 'He is the end of things, the final man,' is not just a reference to the fact of death common to all men. It must go <u>beyond</u> the end: surely 'the end of things, the final man,' is the mature, intuitive, aware individual who is the end result of the sum of the experience of living and observing and being: that wonder of all wonders, the <u>final</u> man, the man who has seen beyond the obvious and heard 'the murmur of the absolute.' And, of his loving catalogue of littles,--the mountain, the blue shine on snow, the after light on 'ice-burdened pines,' the odor of basswood, the silence of water--he comments, 'All finite things reveal infinitude.' This same implicit pantheism shines from Roethke again when he concludes with a comment upon the human mind's comprehension of the infinite: 'The pure serene of memory in one man,--/A ripple

widening from a single stone/winding around the waters of the world.'

The fourth and fifth stanzas from "The Abyss," another of the Far Field poems, show a Roethke who is moving ever closer to intuitive acceptance of the indwelling spirit in nature.

from The Abyss[25]

4

How can I dream except beyond this life?
Can I outleap the sea--
The edge of all the land, the final sea?
I envy the tendrils, their eyeless seeking,
The child's hand reaching into the coiled smilax,
And I obey the wind at my back
Bringing me home from the twilight fishing.

In this, my half-rest,
Knowing slows for a moment,
And not-knowing enters, silent,
Bearing being itself,
And the fire dances
To the stream's
Flowing.

Do we move toward God, or merely another condition?
By the salt waves I hear a river's undersong,
In a place of mottled clouds, a thin mist morning
I rock between dark and dark,
My soul nearly my own,
My dead selves singing.
And I embrace this calm--
Such quiet under the small leaves--
Near the stem, whiter at root,
A luminous stillness

The shade speaks slowly:
'Adore and draw near.
Who knows this--
Knows all.'

---

[25]Roethke, The Collected Poems, pp. 221-222.

from The Abyss[26]

5

I thirst by day. I watch by night.
I receive. I have been received!
I hear the flowers drinking in their light,
I have taken counsel of the crab and the sea-urchin,
I recall the falling of small waters,
The stream slipping beneath the mossy logs,
Winding down to the stretch of irregular sand,
The great logs piled like matchsticks.

I am most immoderately married:
The Lord God has taken my heaviness away;
I have merged like the bird, with the bright air,
And my thought flies to the place by the bo-tree.

Being, not doing, is my first joy.

The actual abyss of the title is, of course, Roethke's reference to the immeasurable gulf between life and what comes after death. And somehow,--after the agonizing experiences of nervous breakdowns from trying to go back to the birth experience and life-before-birth,--Roethke has worked his way toward a kind of serenity. He has not been able to know or understand fully what life is all about, but he has been able, at last, to let 'not-knowing' enter his thinking. And he accepts the not-known as a part of the Whole that he has been seeking for so long. Before one examines further the philosophical ideas here, however, it is worthwhile to

---

[26] Ibid., p. 222.

note the lack of end rhyme in the poem. But, though end rhyme is not there, the total effect of the poem is a unified one. And Roethke's technique of much internal rhyme--quite unobtrusive (because it is so delicately fashioned) until one goes to look for it--may well be a key to that satisfying unity. There are the many - ing rhymes in stanza four, for example: seeking, reaching, bringing, fishing, knowing, flowing, bearing, being, morning, evening, singing. And the lovely long e sounds also add to the quiet mood of the poem: dream, outleap, sea, seeking, being. Surely the techniques that Roethke employs to make his poetry sing--the -ing sounds and long e sounds, for example--contribute to the mood of pantheism that pervades "The Abyss." And the added garland upon the brow of implied pantheism has to be the softly sibilant string of s's, like so many matched pearls, in the last segment of the fourth stanza: salt, soul, singing, such, stem, stillness. But it is in the question and answer technique of the fourth stanza that Roethke's inquiring pantheism emerges. 'How can I dream except beyond this life?/ Can I outleap the sea--/ The edge of all the land, the final sea?' Can I trust the Unknown on the basis of what I accept of the Known, he is asking.

And again he wonders about death and after-death: 'Do we move toward God, or merely another condition?' But then he hears a river's undersong, he discovers 'My soul nearly my own' and he stops the struggling and the endless asking: 'I embrace this calm... a luminous stillness.' And there is a biblical tone to the quatrain that closes the fourth stanza as, out of voiceless nature, comes a Voice:

> The shade speaks slowly:
> 'Adore and draw near.
> Who knows this--
> Knows all.

The fifth or concluding stanza of "The Abyss" sings with an almost total optimism, an ecstatic acceptance of God in nature and God in man. The mood of 'I could say hello to things!' of the early Roethke has become translated into positive verb forms, active voice, first person singular, as he recites a personal, psalm-like, pantheistic litany:

> I thirst
> I watch
> I receive
> I have been received
> I hear
> I have taken counsel
> I recall
> I am

Of the 'I am' Roethke concludes, 'I am most immoderately married.' And one has the distinct impression

that is not of his actual marriage alone that he is talking, but of another marriage: that of the physical and spiritual sides of his nature. Then he carries this marriage of the opposites of his nature still further: not only has 'the Lord God taken my heaviness away' but 'I have merged like the bird, with the bright air.' Roethke is, pantheistically, one with the One of nature. No longer analyzing and agonizing, he realizes that 'Being, not doing, is my first joy.'

And Dickey[27] could have had "The Abyss" in mind when he wrote,

> There is no poetry anywhere that is so valuably conscious of the human body as Roethke's; no poetry that can place the body in an environment--wind, seascape, greenhouse, forest, desert, mountainside, among animals or insects or stones--so vividly and evocatively, waking unheard of exchanges between the place and human responsiveness at its most creative. He more than any other is a poet of pure being.

William Heyen, too, verifies his glimpse of Roethke's pantheistic quest:

> Struggling for security and recognition, fearing the madness that often threatened and the extinction that awaited him at death, he was a man looking for words that could help him sing.

---

[27] James Dickey, "The Greatest American Poet," Atlantic, CCXXII (November, 1968), 56.

[28] William Heyen, "He Blusters, Sorrows, and Laughs," Saturday Review, LI (June 22, 1968), 78.

In Evening Air[29]

1

A dark theme keeps me here,
Though summer blazes in the vireo's eye.
Who would be half possessed
By his own nakedness?
Waking's my care--
I'll make a broken music, or I'll die.

2

Ye littles, lie more close!
Make me, O Lord, a last, a simple thing
Time cannot overwhelm.
Once I transcended time:
A bud broke to a rose,
And I rose from a last diminishing.

3

I look down the far light
And I behold the dark side of a tree
Far down a billowing plain,
And when I look again,
It's lost upon the night--
Night I embrace, a dear proximity.

4

I stand by a low fire
Counting the wisps of flame, and I watch how
Light shifts upon the wall.
I bid stillness be still.
I see, in evening air,
How slowly dark comes down on what we do.

---

[29]Roethke, The Collected Poems, p. 240.

This third selection from the Far Field poems, "In Evening Air," reveals a quieter Roethke, still eulogizing his beloved 'littles,' still seeing more clearly into the meaning of things, in the darkness or evening of his life, than he did in the sunlight of the morning time. This poem still contains a catalogue of the small things he has come to love--and a vireo, a rose, a tree, and a fire all find Roethke enjoying them for what they are, but more especially for what they mean to him. 'Summer blazes in the vireo's eye,' 'A bud broke to a rose,' and Roethke 'rose from a last diminishing.' 'The dark side of a tree' is at first clearly seen, then 'lost upon the night.' In the evening of his life, Roethke says, 'I stand by a low fire.' The vital force of life burns low in him,true, but one needs to study again the implicit pantheism of the second stanza:

> Ye littles, lie more close!
> Make me, O Lord, a last, a simple thing
> Time cannot overwhelm.
> Once I transcended time:
> A bud broke to a rose,
> And I rose from a last diminishing.

If, then, death is only the next stage of development beyond what is called life, Roethke, believing in the undying 'littles' of nature and the Power they represent,

believes that he too may survive death, or the 'last diminishing.' And, at this dark time near the end of his life, it is given to him to stand outside himself and the human condition and 'see, in evening air/How slowly dark comes down on what we do.' The solemn, stately rhythm of this last line, with its heavy masculine beats, suggests a certain dignity and gentleness with which the inevitable darkness of death descends, and the quiet acquiescence of a man who accepts the beginning and the end of life as being in the hands of a Power in him and within the universe. The all-embracing, unifying effect of a definite rhyme scheme in this poem--abccab--makes the calm pantheism of the poet seem even more tranquil as his doubts resolve into peaceful acceptance. In addition, the liquid l's of littles, lie, last, look, light, lost, low--and the softly whispering s's of summer, simple, side, stand, shifts, stillness, see, slowly--together contribute to a soothing, lyrical mood.

As John Wain[30] expressed it,

> Reciprocated love, joyous participation in the rhythms to which all nature dances, these are one of the main avenues by which the individual spirit reaches its goal.

---

[30] John Wain, "Theodore Roethke," The Critical Quarterly, VI (Winter, 1964), 325.

And Richard Eberhart [31] has this to say in regard to Roethke's pantheistic insights:

> He was aware of the brevity of time, our brief stay on the earth, and so he tried to penetrate the ideal essence behind the mask of time; he tried, at first through writing of newts and worms and later and last--through mysticism, to penetrate the heart of life and to give, through sensuous sometimes sensual images, the feel of nature as most sensitively apprehended by him.
>
> It was a deep, intuitive relationship to nature that he had as a lyric poet. He was enveloped in self, in the ego, so deeply that at times he could not distinguish between the inner and the outer world of reality. It was one reality to him.

---

[31] Richard Eberhart, "On Theodore Roethke's Poetry," Southern Review, I (July, 1965), 619-620.

Infirmity[32]

In purest song one plays the constant fool
As changes shimmer in the inner eye.
I stare and stare into a deepening pool
And tell myself my image cannot die.
I love myself: that's my one constancy.
Oh, to be something else, yet still to be!

Sweet Christ, rejoice in my infirmity;
There's little left I care to call my own.
Today they drained the fluid from a knee
And pumped a shoulder full of cortisone;
Thus I conform to my divinity
By dying inward like an aging tree.

The instant ages on the living eye;
Light on its rounds, a pure extreme of light
Breaks on me as my meager flesh breaks down--
The soul delights in that extremity.
Blessed are the meek; they shall inherit wrath;
I'm son and father of my only death.

A mind too active is no mind at all;
The deep eye sees the shimmer on the stone;
The eternal seeks, and finds, the temporal,
The change from dark to light of the slow moon,
Dead to myself, and all I hold most dear,
I move beyond the reach of wind and fire.

Deep in the greens of summer sing the lives
I've come to love. A vireo whets its bill.
The great day balances upon the leaves;
My ears still hear the bird when all is still;
My soul is still my soul, and still the Son,
And knowing this, I am not yet undone.

Things without hands take hands; there is no choice,--
Eternity's not easily come by.
When opposites come suddenly in place,
I teach my eyes to hear, my ears to see
How body from spirit slowly does unwind
Until we are pure spirit at the end.

---

[32]Roethke, The Collected Poems, p. 244.

"Infirmity," another poem from The Far Field portion of The Collected Poems, has many of the hallmarks of the constantly evolving Roethke pantheism. There is a serenity of mood derived partly from a controlled rhyme pattern- ababcc-- and the beautifully flexible rhythm of iambic pentameter. The literal and figurative implications of light, a subject Roethke delights in, give this poem a warm, pantheistic quality. There is, besides, the expected feast for the reader's inner eye in references to the moon, the greens of summer, and one of his favorites, the vireo. But undoubtedly the most fascinating quality about this poem, if one sets aside the ideas themselves for the moment, is the symphony of sound effects. There is so much of melody, and marvelously contrasting dissonance as well, that one wonders what Roethke might have done, had he chosen music, not poetry, to express his moods. A veritable parade of softly singing s sounds beguiles the ear: song/shimmer/stare/something/still/sweet/shoulder/soul/son/shimmer/stone/seeks/slow/summer/see/see/slowly/spirit. Some lovely long e sounds arrive upon the poetic scene and add a certain smoothness to the whispering s's:

deepening/constancy/be/sweet/infirmity/knee/divinity/ tree/extreme/me/meager/delights/extremity/deep/eternal/ seeks. As if these beautifully blended s and e sounds were not virtuosity beyond belief, Roethke next weaves in some long i sounds that are solemn and sweetly sad: I/die/my/Christ/dying/light/delights/mind/finds/fire/ lives/by/unwind. But he has not finished with his word music until he adds a group of short i sounds. These create a counterbalance to the smooth sounds--giving an abrupt, stop-short quality to the lines, a quality that forces the reader to think about what Roethke is saying: shimmer/inner/something/still/infirmity/ little/divinity/inward/instant/living/extremity/inherit/ active. And then, out of these extraordinary sound effects, come the deceptively simple thoughts of the poet,--thoughts that incorporate his unique pantheism:

> Light on its rounds, a pure extreme of light
> Breaks on me as my meager flesh breaks down.
>
> The eternal seeks, and finds, the temporal.
>
> Eternity's not easily come by.
>
> How body from spirit slowly does unwind
> Until we are pure spirit at the end.

Thus, in this quiet, understated, musical, sometimes whimsical poem, shines the evidence of Roethke's

personal encounter with pantheism: his hard-won discovery that, in nature and in man, there is evidence of spirit.

Ralph Mills[33] concurs that Roethke does, at last, arrive at meaning of life.

> In these [final] poems various thematic preoccupations--the identity of self, its relation to the beloved, to nature, and to God--also achieve rewarding fulfillment.

In a totally different mood, one that runs the gamut from hopeless despair to quiet acceptance, is the poem, "In a Dark Time." Here is a Hamlet-like soliloquy filled with the stark terror of a Roethke tormented by breakdown, yet daring to make the leap of faith away from that terror toward what he believes, at last, to be the ultimate truth--the all-encompassing tenderness of God.

---

[33] Ralph J. Mills, "Roethke's Last Poems," Poetry CV (November, 1964), 122.

In a Dark Time[34]

In a dark time, the eye begins to see,
I meet my shadow in the deepening shade;
I hear my echo in the echoing wood--
A lord of nature weeping to a tree.
I live between the heron and the wren.
Beasts of the hill and serpents of the den.

What's madness but nobility of soul
At odds with circumstances? The day's on fire!
I know the purity of pure despair,
My shadow pinned against a sweating wall.
That place among the rocks--is it a cave,
Or winding path? The edge is what I have.

A steady storm of correspondences!
A night flowing with birds, a ragged moon,
And in broad day the midnight come again!
A man goes far to find out what he is--
Death of the self in a long, tearless night,
All natural shapes blazing unnatural light.

Dark, dark my light, and darker my desire,
My soul, like some heat-maddened summer fly,
Keeps buzzing at the sill. Which I is I?
A fallen man, I climb out of my fear.
The mind enters itself, and God the mind,
And one is One, free in the tearing wind.

Again, as in several of the more powerful poems, Roethke chooses to discipline frightened, scurrying thoughts, which might otherwise sound maudlin, with a definite rhyme scheme--abbacc-- together with the restraining, yet flexible, rhythm of iambic pentameter to voice his painful discoveries about himself, his

---

[34]Roethke, The Collected Poems, p. 239.

fears, and the ultimate answers to those fears. Again, the affinity he has for s sounds is obvious in the word choices, yet these are not soothing but disquieting s sounds, suited to the strident voices of his fears. Even the s sounds in the middles of words, as well as those at the ends of them, add a chilling effect that evokes the barely controlled terror of a man who recalls the worst stages of breakdown: what's/madness/soul/odds/circumstance/ day's/despair/shadow/against/sweating/is/steady/ storm/correspondences/birds/goes/self/tearless/shapes/ desire/soul/some/summer/sill/itself. After the s's have rushed by on sibilant wings, one begins to hear the heavy, hammer-like blows of d words pounding away at Roethke and, thus, at the reader as well: dark/day/despair/day/death/dark/darker. Hissing and pounding noises: not anything to soothe poet or reader, or is there? Just then the marvelous murmur of m's can be heard,-- warm, positive sounds in strong, masculine cadence, suggesting that Roethke makes the other maddening sounds go away, using the m's to negate the dark power of the s and d words: madness/moon/ midnight/man/my/heat-maddened/summer/man/climb/mind. This man has come to grips with terror: back against the wall, 'The edge is what I have.' And 'A man goes

far to find out what he is--' even into breakdown, in search of self. Then, in the 'death of self' Roethke discovers the blaze of light that is his symbol for spiritual illumination: 'All natural shapes blazing unnatural light.' In nature there is, for Roethke, not only the light of sun and moon, but the unnatural, or beyond the natural light, of that which illuminates the Whole. And the last three lines of "In a Dark Time" soar in triumph over his dying fears:

> A fallen man, I climb out of my fear,
> The mind enters itself, and God the mind,
> And one is One, free in the tearing wind.

Roethke's implicit pantheism sounds the final, vibrant note.

Kenneth Burke[35] sums up this poet's gift for taking the reader into his dark or light moods and making him a part of those moods:

> What the scientific researchers might seek to describe or formulate for an observer, the aesthetics of poetry would transform into experience for a participant. The possible range would comprise rarity, oddity, magic, the mystical, and breakdown.

And Louis Untermeyer[36] verifies Roethke's experiences of being almost translated:

> He had visions: 'Suddenly I knew how to enter into the life of everything around me. I knew how it felt to be a tree, a blade of grass, a rabbit.'

---

[35]Kenneth Burke, "Cult of the Breakthrough," New Republic, CLIX (September 21, 1968), 25.

[36]Louis Untermeyer, "Multifaceted Portrait of a Multifaceted Poet," Saturday Review, LI (November 9, 1968), 36.

But to miss the last miniature marvel of a pantheistic poem of The Far Field is, perhaps, to miss all.

Once More, the Round[37]

What's greater, Pebble or Pond?
What can be known? The Unknown.
My true self runs toward a Hill
More! O More! visible.

Now I adore my life
With the Bird, the abiding Leaf,
With the Fish, the questing Snail,
And the Eye altering all;
And I dance with William Blake
For love, for Love's sake;

And everything comes to One,
As we dance on, dance on, dance on.

The Hill of the invisible Reality becomes increasingly visible as the spiritual Eye sees what the physical eye cannot.

In fact, Rosenthal[38] accords Roethke a place among the modern Romantic pantheists:

> The poems [of The Far Field] are free to attempt something like joyous acceptance of things as they are, immersion in nature in the older Romantic sense.... Sometimes Roethke almost achieves what he is after: a certain delicate precision, a light-hearted seriousness such as we are told the early Christians possessed, a sweetness of spirit deriving from a literal rendering of the minutiae of nature and from accepting their meaning without quarreling about ultimates.

---

[37]Roethke, The Collected Poems, p. 251.

[38]M.L. Rosenthal, The New Poets (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 113.

CHAPTER IV

THE POETRY OF STRAW FOR THE FIRE

Of decided interest to the Roethke scholar is the collection of his never before published poetry, Straw for the Fire, which came out in 1972. David Wagoner,[39] who edited it, says,

> Those who know Roethke's work will probably find no new themes here, but many variations on his constantly recurring subject matter: records of his metamorphoses as he attempted to become something other than his usually despised self; nostalgic evocations of the greenhouse Eden, the flabbergasted ecstasy of a man who has glimpsed the Mystic's Oneness, knows it for truth, but fears he may never have it...

And the book is well worth reading if one is seeking to establish a pattern of pantheism central to Roethke's poetry because there are both finished and unfinished verses dating from 1948 to 1963. This broad time span thus enables the researcher to trace again the early tendency of the poet toward depression and the later one toward a quiet pantheism which develops during some fifteen years of writing.

---

[39]David Wagoner in Theodore Roethke's Straw for the Fire, (Garden City: Doubleday, 1972), pp. 13-14.

As one might expect, most of the poems chosen from his notebooks are incomplete or fragmented. Nevertheless, there are certain ones that reveal careful structure and powerful statements, more than occasional use of rhyme and rhythm, and the imagery and sound effects that one finds in Roethke's other finished work.

From the 1948-1949 poems, found in the section called A Nest of Light, comes an eight-line verse worth examining. (N.B. For easier reference, this writer will number consecutively the selections chosen for commentary.)

1

For what we see is never purely seen,[40]
Not final with its final radiance,
As if we were but animals a-gaze
In a gray field, and grayness all around,
A universe contained by walls of stone,
An ultimate of air, a final scene...
A sea-wind pausing in a summer tree,
A bird serene upon a nest of light...

Written in blank verse, the flexible rhythm of this small poem lends a grace and delicacy of mood well suited to Roethke's pantheistic expression. And, even in the narrow span of eight lines, many striking sound effects may be noted. First, there is the effect that Roethke

---

[40]Roethke, from "A Nest of Light," in Straw for the Fire, p. 34.

there is the effect that Roethke achieves through repetition of words and related words within the first four lines:

> For what we see is never purely seen,
> Not final with its final radiance,
> As if we were but animals a-gaze
> In a gray field and grayness all around.

Not only do the sounds of repeated words fall on an ear already tuned to them from their first appearance, but, the second time that the ear picks them up, the repeated words satisfy the hearing, and the thinking, in much the same fashion that a repeated musical motif does. There is a quiet, serene effect additionally achieved when still other repeated sounds enter the poem. The long a's, for example, are both dark and bright. When they occur in words suggesting the poet's depressed mood, they create just such a mood. When, as the poem continues, the long a's occur in words that suggest buoyancy or optimism, a happier mood comes across to the reader. Chosen purposely, the long a sounds in a-gaze/gray/grayness sound dull and apathetic. However, by contrast, long a sounds in radiance/contained/air/ gleam with the joy of a man who has broken out of his depressing grayness of spirit into a place transformed by 'its final radiance.' Then long e words blend

see/seen/field/tree/serene. The alliteration of many s words like stone/scene/summer/serene/ all tend to add a quiet, tranquil tone. Words with short i add an abruptness, however, that forces the reader to stop and think what Roethke is actually saying about life. Using all the various colors of the diverse word choices, Roethke makes the central theme shine more clearly. Only now and then in this life, he is saying, do any of us see past the drabness or grayness of it all and into the radiance that lies underneath even the most common elements in nature like fields, trees, birds. Once or twice, as though scales had dropped from his eyes, a man catches a glimpse of the One within it all, 'A bird serene upon a nest of light.' Actual light and the figurative, symbolic light, dawn with a certain radiance of insight upon one who is sensitive enough to wait and watch and think his way beyond the dull commonplace. One is reminded of the words of St. Paul about what is beyond Roethke's 'universe contained by walls of stone': "For now we see through a glass darkly, but then face to face." Again, Roethke's implicit pantheism perceives and believes in the Light beyond light.

David Wagoner[41] quotes the poet's own reverent attitude toward the wonder of creativity in words that Roethke addressed to his students:

> Faith. That's it...an act of faith. In what? In the imagination of us all, in a creative capacity--that most sacred thing--that lies dormant, never dead, in everyone.

And Roethke, even after numerous nervous breakdowns in his lifetime--seven major ones between 1935 and 1960-- continues to believe in his unique poetic gift, still turns away from the horrors of depression toward a cautiously optimistic philosophy that finally develops into a quietly joyful pantheism.

Further evidence for Roethke's essential pantheism appears in a second selection from Straw for the Fire. Again, this poem is taken from the section called A Nest of Light.

---

[41] David Wagoner, "Words for Young Writers--From the Notes of Theodore Roethke," Saturday Review, LI (June 29, 1968), 14.

2

Early early[42]
That simple time
When eyes knew
The shine of seals;
Ditches at noon
Swarmed with stars;
The hills hummed;
The moon came out
Bright on the shells
Wet from the water
Of slacking waves.
O how could early
Otherwise be?

The summer haze
Stayed into evening;
The moon falling
Through the screen,
Making a cross,
Repeating a shadow,
The weedy fields
Sweet as freshets,
The nightwind blowing,
The blossoms dropping...
Light couldn't sleep;
It stayed all night,
Rocking with blossoms
With warm hands...

---

[42]Roethke, from "A Nest of Light," in Straw for the Fire, p. 35.

This selection finds Roethke remembering not merely any early summer when he was very young, but the happier, warmer summertime of life itself. Again, the catalogue of 'lovely littles' is drawn always from nature, never from man-created objets d'art. As Michael Benedikt's [43] view confirms,

> He was really a particularly drastic kind of nature-mystic. He abolished the bric-a-brac of society, tacitly prescribing concentration on nature.

The parade of nature's small ones includes ditches, stars, hills, moon, shells, fields, wind, blossoms. The eyes of the reader must dart up and down, figuratively speaking, to catch sight of things toward the sky and toward the earth. Quite an impressive array in a poem only two verses long: a total of twenty-six lines, and not a contrived thing in the lot. Again, the s alliteration conjures up a superb summer day out of an early time. Sone w alliteratives make warm pictures of wind and water. Next, the long e words evoke the quietly joyful mood of the child that Roethke was. And, though there is no rhyme scheme, yet the

---

[43] Michael Benedikt, "The Completed Pattern," Poetry, CIX (January, 1967), 263.

second verse has the effect of being unified by the numerous - ing words like evening/falling/making/dropping. (One can almost see and hear the child-Roethke of the 'early simple time' smiling and rocking back and forth to the syllables of these-ing motions!) But the pantheistic mood of that Eden-early time is what the totality of words evokes:

Ditches at noon
Swarmed with stars.

Only a child would be thrilled by glints of noon sun on water in a ditch, of all places.

The hills hummed.

How many people even have time to listen for the sounds of nature that most certainly do make a hill hum! And the black velvet cross-shaped shadows made by moonlight through a screen--how many people even remember that once, in the early time of life, such shadows did appear?

Light couldn't sleep;
It stayed all night,
Rocking with blossoms
With warm hands.

To the man-child who sits by the window, looking out on a moon-drenched summer night, it truly seems that neither he nor light can sleep. There is the actual light from the moon itself, but, symbolically, there is

the Light beyond light that is intuitively sensed, perhaps most keenly then, when one is very young.

A third selection from A Nest of Light finds the poet remembering the sunlight and its transforming effect upon the world around him.

3

Still air, still; almost noon,[44]
The leaves dry on the trellis.
Will the green slime take fire, the slime on
the benches?
The soil is past itself, half-gray, half-green...
The harp of the self stills.
Blue air, breathe on these nerves
Heat from the roses.
My hands are among blossoms,
Motion has narrowed,
My fingers natural.
Holding these, what do I hold?
More than a mold's kiss
Lifted into starlight,
Brought to this morning shape.
My self breathes in these:
Star-flower, portal into night,
Breathing brighter than water,
The twilight cannot whelm you.

The expected s alliteratives become constantly fresh and new as Roethke once more selects the perfect words to summon up sight and sound. The brief example of kinesthesia is pure delight:

---

[44]Roethke, Straw for the Fire, p. 52.

Blue air, breathe on these nerves
Heat from the roses.

On a sunny, clear day the sky does appear to be blue, but blue air there is not, unless one thinks of how what seems to be air is colored by forms of pollution, for example. Yet Roethke is right, poetically: pure air, rose-scented, should be blue. Some murmuring m sounds suggest, perhaps, the insects of summer. Resonant n sounds like noon/nerves/narrowed could stand for the high strung, depressed mood of Roethke on a hot summer day. But the brilliant Roethke pyrotechnics of a barrage of b sounds explode delightfully, like an old-fashioned fireworks display viewed at a comfortable distance: benches/blue/breathe/blossoms/brought/breathes/ breathing/brighter. Beautiful! Yet it is the total effect, that which he says by his placement of all the word combinations, that evokes the mood of tender pantheism:

'Will the green slime take fire, the slime on the benches?'

What other poet has taken the slime of snails and made it blaze with beauty when sunlight strikes it?

'The harp of the self stills.'

Now Roethke is quiet within himself and is thus lifted out of self.

My hands are among blossoms.
.....
Holding these, what do I hold?

Almost, these are echoes of Tennyson's "Flower in the Crannied Wall," but especially moving in their understatement. And what does Roethke hold? A fragile thing, a blossom-ephemeral, yet everlasting.

My self breathes in these:
Star-flower, portal into the night
Breathing brighter than water,
The twilight cannot whelm you.

And if blossoms that burst briefly, then wither, cannot be truly destroyed, even by the twilight of seeming decay, then perhaps Roethke is asking for his own sake, 'If a man die, shall he live again?' For 'nobody has killed off the snails.'

Next, from the 1949-1950 section of the Roethke notebooks, The Wrath of Other Winds, comes a jewel of a poem, metaphysical in mood and treatment.

4

Teach me, sweet love, a way of being plain![45]
My virtues are but vices in disguise,
The little light I had was Henry Vaughan's.
I hunted fire in ice: the soul's unease
In the loose rubble, the least glittering stone:
And what I found was but one riddled bone:

I move, unseeing, toward an absolute
So bright within it darkens all I am;
Am dropped away: dropped out of time,
One still too frail to bear himself, alone...

---

[45]Roethke, Straw for the Fire, p. 123.

This particular poem, disciplined and polished, comes out of a dark time for Roethke, who experiences his third nervous breakdown during the last months of 1949 and the early months of 1950. There is a two-fold mood: one of bleak despair in the first stanza, and, in the second, one of growing optimism because of the brightness toward which Roethke gropes, now certain that the Absolute _is_ there. He does not see it with the physical eye; rather, he moves toward it by the light of the inner eye. The unique flexibility of iambic pentameter rhythm, added to the rhyme scheme--ababccdeec--which is partly slant rhyme, partly true, results in greater compression and focus when handled by a poet like Roethke. Sound effects, as always, add greatly to the bleakness of mood in one portion, and to the quietly accepting mood of the other. Also, one brief almost-oxymoron expresses Roethke's fruitless earlier search for certainty: 'I hunted fire in ice.' 'Clusters of _l_ words seem to add to the plea for help in the poet's desperate search: love/little/light/loose/least. But it is, of course, what Roethke actually _says_ in the poem that traces his climb out of darkness toward light. When he calls upon sweet love, surely that love is both physical _and_ spiritual.

Like the metaphysical poets whom he so admired, his search for truth involves indulging his physicality,--'hunting fire in ice: the soul's unease/ In the loose rubble, the least glittering stone;/ And what I found was but one riddled bone.' In physical indulgences and in rational attempts to arrive at truth, he has found only emptiness: 'one riddled bone.' And then, when his mood is darkest, something within him intuitively continues the search:

> I move, unseeing, toward an absolute
> So bright within it darkens all I am;
> Am dropped away: dropped out of time,
> One still too frail to bear himself, alone...

Here is the turning point, away from negative, depressed thoughts, and, in spite of recent mental and physical difficulties, a pressing toward 'an absolute/so bright within it darkens all I am.' The Light beyond light of implicit pantheism floods him with reassurance.

Again, Michael Benedikt[46] underscores Roethke's religious quest:

> In his ability to meditate convincingly upon the mystical realities of natural existence, in seizing the unseen, Roethke has few parallels among poets in English.

---

[46]Benedikt, "The Completed Pattern," p. 266.

From My Instant of Forever, in Straw for the Fire, comes a final untitled poem that reveals still more of Roethke's long, painful struggle out of terror and into light. Written sometime in the years between his sixth nervous breakdown and his death in 1963, it mirrors his early despair and later joy.

5

Innocency renewed:[47]
The soul talking to itself in the long silences,
After the feathery rain plumes the high fir-trees,
And the waves lapse back,
And the morning mists begin moving over the low marshes,
To the best of myself I prayed:
Was that enough?
In that cold glittering, the last of light,
In the clarity of thumping substances,
The glare and blare drowning the soul's voice,
I sank deep into my bones;
My eyes opened inwardly to the small light,
The unconsuming fire outlives the wind;
I remembered what I was.

While there is no end rhyme here, yet there are many words containing long e sounds as well as a string of final-ing words--both of which create an internal rhyming effect and enable Roethke to project his ideas in more precise, more powerful fashion. However, one can become so enthralled with the sound effects of the poetry that he becomes side-tracked and thus fails to understand what is most vital: the ideas of the poet, and, in this instance, to what extent

---

[47]Roethke, Straw for the Fire, p. 143.

those ideas express his spiritual growth--acknowledging his frequent depressed moods, but revealing his continued strivings, erratic though they may be, toward a quiet pantheism. And so, keeping in mind that Roethke's sound effects are important, but are, nonetheless, ancillary[48] to the central thought of the poem, this writer--having analyzed a number of the poems throughout this thesis--turns from further analysis to concentrate upon what Roethke is actually saying about losing innocence and faith and then finding them once more--within himself and outside himself, in nature. The first line, 'Innocency renewed:' suggests that he is rediscovering a child-like capacity for innocence after all of his physical and mental illness together with his disillusionment with the world, but especially with himself and his failings. Suddenly, late in his life, he experiences a renaissance of the innocence of an Eden-early time. He now meditates quietly: 'The soul talking to itself in the long silences.' He is going back toward innocence, toward a faith in something inside himself that hears and cares: the soul. Then his

---

[48]Dr. E.L.Mayo's comment to the writer in a conversation on July 9, 1974.

vivid imagery recreates the scene for the reader:

> After the feathery rain plumes the high fir-trees,
> And the waves lapse back,
> And the morning mists begin moving over the low marshes,
> To the best of myself I prayed:
> Was that enough?

And the poet makes the reader-viewer see first the rain in the tops of trees, then waves rolling back, and, finally, morning mist over the marshes. As he often does, Roethke starts with sky and weather and moves downward toward earth, or, conversely but equally logically, his sequence of images takes the reader from the earth toward the sky. But, and highly important to this search for certainty, Roethke turns from the nature he observes so closely and evokes so powerfully in words, and says--'To the best of myself I prayed.' He adds, 'Was that enough?' Answering his own question by taking a further spiritual stance, he "tunes out" 'the clarity of thumping substances/ the glare and blare drowning the soul's voice' (and these cacophonous sounds could be those of city traffic and water bubbling in hydrotherapy tubs in a hospital where he is undergoing treatment). Plunging deeply within himself, where the real Roethke lives, 'I sank deep into my bones.'

And when one gets down to bare facts, in the physical or spiritual sense, one usually strips himself down to basics, to the bone, as it were. In this quiet waiting for the reality of the invisible to visit him, Roethke's 'eyes open inwardly to the small light.' He is now certain, beyond need for rational proof, that Light can come, does come, if one can be still and wait. 'It will come again,' as he remarks in an earlier poem. But now the seal of quiet pantheism stamps itself upon his spirit. He knows, beyond the need for completely knowing, 'The unconsuming fire outlives the wind;/ I remembered what I was.' He recognizes his spiritual nature. One hears in the ending almost an overtone of 'Beloved, for now are ye the sons of God. And it doth not yet appear what ye shall be.'

Robert Shaw[49] says of these 'straw' poems,

> Roethke may have been phenomenally copious... but he was not just running off at the pen. If these selections are representative, he was putting forth a constant effort, even in passages he never thought destined to see the light, to deal honestly with perennial themes. Here again is the longing to plumb the mysteries of nature, the groping toward God.

---

[49] Robert B. Shaw, "Roethke Rough," Poetry, CXXI (March, 1973), 341.

And James Dickey,[50] like Roethke a teacher and a poet, verifies and underscores the pantheistic tendencies of this last poetry:

> They [Roethke's poems] are the cries of a creature in a landscape which is beautiful and filled with mystery and does not know that it is: the utterances of a perceiving mind which cannot enter wholly into nature and yet yearns to, set off from the mindless flow it would become by a mind that reflects and assesses.

---

[50]James Dickey, "Theodore Roethke," Poetry, CV (November, 1964), 121.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

What evidence is there for believing in Roethke's essential pantheism even in the face of his continued breakdowns and constant doubts about his own worth? The researcher can best answer this question by first reminding the reader of this thesis that the methodology has been two-fold: 1) a thorough survey of such critical views as confirm the likelihood of pantheism in Roethke's poetry, and 2) an examination of the primary sources, the poems, for actual evidence of such pantheism. And now, in conclusion, having searched the poetry of three books representing the early, middle, and late periods of Roethke's writing career, this writer should 1) bring together some recent critical judgments of Roethke's place in the pantheon of nature poets and 2) summarize the strong evidence in the poems themselves for believing that this poet is pantheistic.

George Wolff,[51] in his dissertation on Roethke's themes and imagery, concludes that--

> Despite the evidence in Roethke's work that he was out of love with the world, the overall development is toward an affirmation of 'the productions of time.'

---

[51]George A. Wolff, "The Production of Time: Themes and Images in the Poetry of Theodore Roethke," Dissertation Abstracts, XXVII (Michigan State University, 1967), 3185A.

Stephen Spender,[52] though not at all certain that this is a great poetic voice, has to agree that Roethke does use nature themes in unique fashion:

> The idea--if I understand it--is that the poet, through allowing his isolated self to die, enters into that life which is the world outside him. Nevertheless, this supposed outside world remains his own creation.

Kunitz[53] quotes Roethke himself as to the poet's Eden-forever-after view:

> Greenhouse: 'my symbol for the whole of life...a heaven-on-earth,' was Roethke's revealing later gloss.

Rosenthal,[54] author and anthologist, notes Roethke's pantheistic tendencies and also confirms the poet's search for self by going back to the recollections of his early life:

> He finds another clue to salvation. It is the...psychological re-entry into the world of his most vivid childhood memories, the world of the 'long greenhouse' which he has called 'my symbol for the whole of life, a womb, a heaven-on-earth.' Re-entry into this womb, one gathers, is the necessary preliminary for a rebirth of the Self.

---

[52] Stephen Spender, "Roethke: The Lost Son," New Republic, CLV (August 27, 1966), 25.

[53] Stanley Kunitz, "Poems of Roethke," New Republic, CLII (January 23, 1965), 23.

[54] M.L. Rosenthal, The Modern Poets (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960), p. 243.

An especially strong assertion of the validity of Roethke's pantheism comes from Reichertz:[55]

> Roethke's use of his own past to root the growth of self in the world as organism has an analogue in the romantic tradition, especially in the poetry of Wordsworth, who sought to anchor the growth of human consciousness in a living nature.

William Heyen[56] expresses the view that the deceptively simple subject matter of Roethke's early poems develops into an intricate symbolism of power and depth, a factor which this thesis writer believes accounts in large part for his inherent pantheism.

> Roethke deepens his minimal imagery into a complex symbolism during the course of his career. Not only the small creatures of the natural world, but also inanimate objects and children are considered as part of Roethke's minimal vision. In turn, the author finds it is the poet's theory of correspondence between minimals and the spiritual conditions of the speakers of his poems that provides much of Roethke's originality and power.

---

[55] Ronald Reichertz, "'Once More the Round': An Introduction to the Poetry of Theodore Roethke," Dissertation Abstracts, XXVIII (University of Wisconsin, 1967), 4644A.

[56] William Heyen, "Essays on the Later Poetry of Theodore Roethke," Dissertation Abstracts, XXVIII (Ohio University, 1967), 3185A.

Hayden Carruth[57] says of Roethke:

> In his last years he concentrated every ounce of his lyrical strength on the task of escaping, submerging the self in the universe, silencing the individual voice in the voice of nature. The fact is that in his best poems about nature Roethke almost brought it off, partly through his verbal and imaginative power, partly through his individual synthesis of disparate pantheistic strains.

Echoing Carruth's view of Roethke as a poet of "disparate pantheistic strains" is John Ciardi,[58] himself a teacher and poet.

> It was Roethke's triumph as a poet to bring [this] compulsive spirit to form without denying the existence either of the rank root or the flower.

Alan Seager,[59] author of The Glass House, a biography of Roethke, remarks upon the final portion of the latter's life.

> The last years of Ted's life, as we look back on them knowing they were the last, seem to have a strange air of unconscious preparation. As the fabric of his body begins to give way, the best of his mind, his poetry--seeming to have forgiven everyone everything, demolished its hatreds, and solved all its discords--strives toward a mystical union with his Father.

---

[57] Hayden Carruth, "Requiem for God's Gardener," Nation, CIC (September 28, 1964), 169.

[58] John Ciardi, "Theodore Roethke: A Passion and a Maker," Saturday Review, XLVI (August 31, 1963), 13.

[59] Allan Seager, The Glass House (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968), p. 251.

As Malkoff[60] remarks early in his book,

> He wrote of flowers, of the delicate and small things of the world, he sang the spirit as he found it manifest in man and nature...

But it is Malkoff's[61] final summation, near the end of his book on the poet, that helps to support the thesis that Roethke is to be considered a pantheist.

> ...it is God, the eternal, who needs and seeks man. The self is afraid of being swallowed up in the impersonality of the Godhead; it is afraid to confront its imminent nonbeing. However, the voices of the natural world, symbolized, as usual, by the song of a bird, pull the poet back from the edge of despair: he still has his soul, he is still the Son. But the struggle is not by any means over. It is only with great difficulty that the poet wins the courage to face eternity and annihilation, and thereby affirm the meaning of his existence. The mystic experience--when opposites fall into place, when eyes hear and ears see--is now used as a means of understanding the final death of the self, the last merging of one with One; the poet is taught 'How body from spirit does unwind/ until we are pure spirit at the end.'

---

[60] Malkoff, Theodore Roethke, p. 6.

[61] Ibid., pp. 214-15.

Within the poems themselves, as this writer has endeavored to demonstrate in the thesis, are the most valid reasons for believing in Roethke's implicit pantheism. First, there is the discernible pattern of his turning away from the depressed moods that haunted him all his life--and toward a belief in the One, in the Light beyond light. Secondly, there is always a catalogue of the 'lovely diminutives', the little things in nature, not simply listed but surrounded by Roethke's warm, concerned response to each one. Another evidence of pantheism is his unique imagery, beautiful in itself, but highly evocative and symbolic as well. For, behind all the vivid imagery, one discovers the poet's intuitive belief in the compassionate source of Light within nature. A fourth reason for believing in Roethke's pantheism is his awe of, even reverence for, all of nature--even the strange and ugly. Often he describes weeds, for example, in terms of a kind of beauty that they possess for him at least. And at the heart of most of his serious poetry there is usually a question about the imponderables, also an attempt at an answer based on two truths: that which he has learned from personal experience and that which he perceives with the inner eye of the spirit.

Additional cause to see Roethke as pantheistic stems from his personal view of both man and nature as reflecting the Light that does not die out, even though the flame of his belief burns low at times. Another reason to recognize the pantheism of this poet is his use of the poetic device of the apostrophe, or calling upon elements of nature as though they hear him: 'Ye littles, lie more close.' Or 'Snail, snail, glister me forward,/ Bird, soft-sigh me home./Worm, be with me./ This is my hard time.' There is a deep yearning toward what he feels that these 'littles' represent--that which is beyond and within nature. But surely the most powerful argument of all for the predominantly pantheistic view of the poetry is based not only upon the ways in which he describes sights and sounds but the actual <u>thoughts</u> that he voices through the imagery, the statements or affirmations of the Roethke who believes in something beyond his finite self. 'I'm more than when I was born;/ I could say hello to things,/ I could talk to a snail;/ I see what sings!/ What sings!' Or he says, 'I see my heart in the seed' and again, 'A lively understandable spirit/ Once entertained you./ It will come again./ Be still./ Wait.'

BIBLIOGRAPHY

BIBLIOGRAPHY

A. PRIMARY SOURCES

1. Books

Eliot, T.S. Collected Poems. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1958.

Frost, Robert. Collected Poems. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1930.

Roethke, Theodore. The Collected Poems. Garden City: Doubleday, 1966.

_____. Straw for the Fire. Garden City: Doubleday, 1972.

_____. Words for the Wind. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1958.

B. SECONDARY SOURCES

1. Books

Cox, James M., ed. Robert Frost. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1962.

Deutsch, Babette. Poetry in Our Time. New York: Columbia University Press, 1956.

Dickey, James. Sorties. Garden City: Doubleday, 1971.

Gaynor, Frank, ed. The Dictionary of Mysticism. New York: Philosophical Library, 1953.

Howarth, Herbert. Notes on Some Figures Behind T.S. Eliot. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1964.

Malkoff, Karl. Theodore Roethke. New York: Columbia University Press, 1966.

Mills, Ralph J., ed. On the Poet and His Craft. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1965.

_____. ed. Selected Letters of Theodore Roethke. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1968.

Rosenthal, M.L. The Modern Poets. New York: Oxford University Press, 1960.

_____. The New Poets. New York: Oxford University Press, 1967.

Scott, Nathan. The Wild Prayer of Longing. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971.

Seager, Allan. The Glass House. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968.

Smidt, Kristian. Poetry and Belief in the Work of T.S. Eliot. New York: Humanities Press, 1961.

Stein, Arnold, ed. Theodore Roethke: Essays on the Poetry. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1965.

2. Periodicals

Benedikt, Michael. "The Completed Pattern." Poetry, CIX (January, 1967), 262-266.

Boyers, Robert. "The Roethke Puzzle." New Republic, CLX (January 18, 1969), 32-34.

Burke, Kenneth. "Cult of the Breakthrough." New Republic CLIX (September 21, 1968), 25-26.

Carruth, Hayden. "Requiem for God's Gardener." Nation, CIC (September 28, 1964), 168-169.

Ciardi, John. "Theodore Roethke: A Passion and a Maker." Saturday Review, XLVI (August 31, 1963), 13.

Dickey, James. "The Greatest American Poet." Atlantic, CCXXII (November, 1968), 53-58.

_____. "Theodore Roethke." Poetry, CV (November, 1964), 119-122.

Eberhart, Richard. "On Theodore Roethke's Poetry." Southern Review, I (1966), 612-620.

Fuller, J.G. "Trade Winds." Saturday Review, XLVIII (March 27, 1965), 10-11.

Heyen, William. "Essays on the Later Poetry of Theodore Roethke." Dissertation Abstracts, XXVIII (Ohio University, 1967), 3185A.

_____. "He Blusters, Sorrows and Laughs." Saturday Review, LI (June 22, 1968), 78.

Hicks, Granville. "Meeting the Genuine Mystery." Saturday Review, XLVIII (July 31, 1965), 15-16.

Kunitz, Stanley. "Poems of Roethke." New Republic, CLII (January 23, 1965), 23-29.

Mills, Ralph J. "Roethke's Last Poems." Poetry, CV (November, 1964), 122-124.

Reichertz, Ronald. "'Once More the Round': An Introduction to the Poetry of Theodore Roethke." Dissertation Abstracts, XXVIII (University of Wisconsin, 1967), 4643A-4644A.

Shaw, Robert B. "Roethke Rough." Poetry, CXXI (March, 1973), 341-343.

Spender, Stephen. "Roethke: The Lost Son." New Republic CLV (August 27, 1966) 25.

Untermeyer, Louis. "Multifaceted Portrait of a Multi-faceted Poet." Saturday Review, LI (November 9, 1968), 36.

Wagoner, David. "Words for Young Writers--From the Notes of Theodore Roethke." Saturday Review, LI (June 29, 1968), 14-15, 42.

Wain, John. "Theodore Roethke." Critical Quarterly, VI (Winter, 1964), 322-338.

Wolff, George A. "The Productions of Time: Themes and Images in the Poetry of Theodore Roethke." Dissertation Abstracts, XXVII (Michigan State University 1967), 3185A.

C. OTHER SOURCES

Mayo, Edward L. Professor of English at Drake University, Des Moines, Iowa, in a conversation with the writer in July, 1974.

Epilogue

May my words leap lightly on the tongues
of laughing men,
And a laughing God receive me
To another, brighter beginning
After a sudden end...

Finis